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Germany and the Origins of the First World War

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Twenty-two years ago Fritz Fischer's *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (Düsseldorf, 1961) reopened the question of Germany's responsibility for the First World War. Germany, Fischer argued, had purposely brought about a European conflict in 1914 in an effort to become a world power. Equally significantly, he suggested that the sources of Germany's conduct must be sought in her domestic political, economic, and social structure. Fischer later elaborated his thesis in another work, *Krieg der Illusionen* (Düsseldorf, 1969). No postwar historian has been more influential; a steady stream of monographs has elaborated Fischer's thesis during the last two decades. In the long run Fischer's methodological emphasis on the need to focus on the interaction of imperial domestic and foreign policy—a near-heresy in Germany in 1961 despite the earlier pioneering work of Eckhart Kehr—has been at least as influential as his substantive conclusion that the German government was primarily responsible for the First World War. Most subsequent literature has focused upon the influence of domestic factors on German foreign policy, paying particular attention to the inauguration of *Weltpolitik* in 1897 and the outbreak of the war in 1914.

It is perhaps the emphasis of Fischer and his successors upon the connections between internal and external policies that has made German responsibility for the war one of the very few European diplomatic questions to excite such widespread interest over the last twenty years. Yet the results of their attempt to broaden the focus of diplomatic history have been disappointing; the fascinating and critical problem of relating German society and politics to the conduct of the Imperial government has not been solved. Fischer himself has been frequently and rightly criticized for merely concatenating discussions of the political and ideological climate of pre-1914 Germany—liberally spliced with quotations from extreme polemicists—with more traditional analyses of the German government's major decisions, while failing to explain exactly how the former influenced the latter. Other historians have developed much more

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explicit models relating German foreign policy to domestic structures, but these have generally been too unsubtle to uncover the real motives of the German government.

Despite many differences of emphasis and opinion, it is fair to say that a far-reaching consensus of German, British, and American historians now agrees that German foreign policy after 1897 must be understood as a response to the internal threat of socialism and democracy. In 1897 the Imperial government decided to deal with domestic discontent by pursuing an aggressive foreign policy; subsequently it regarded a foreign war as a useful option should domestic problems become intolerable. This in turn has led to the view that Berlin helped unleash war in 1914 because war had become the only way out of Germany's domestic difficulties. These views have been most specifically advanced by V. R. Berghahn in *Germany and the Approach of War in 1914* (New York, 1973) and Hans-Ulrich Wehler in *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich 1871-1918* (Göttingen, 1973), both of whom see the introduction of *Weltpolitik* in 1897 and the decision for war in 1914 as attempts by an aristocratic-agrarian elite to escape the political consequences of the industrialization of Germany.¹ Paul Kennedy's *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism 1860-1914* (London, 1980) also stresses the government's use of *Weltpolitik* as a weapon against the political consequences of industrialization, and agrees that increasing concern with the rise of the Social Democrats contributed to the government's policies in July 1914. In an essay on the causes of the First World War Arno Mayer suggested that in 1914 elements within the German government—possibly including the chancellor—"looked to a smashing diplomatic or military triumph to consolidate the monarchy, to perpetuate Prussia's three-class franchise, and to check both reformists and revolutionaries."² In *July 1914. The Outbreak of the First World War* (New York, 1974) Immanuel Geiss endorsed many aspects of these views, although Geiss, like Fischer, is equally interested in ideological and psychological influences on German policy. In *Reshaping the German Right. Radical Nationalism and Political Change after Bismarck* (New Haven, 1980) Geoff Eley argues that the German government's manipulation of nationalism has been vastly exaggerated, yet adds that by 1914 the German government was in an "impossible situation."³ Wolfgang Mommsen, while supplying many correctives to

¹ See also Wehler's "Probleme des Imperialismus," *Krisenherde des Kaiserreichs 1871-1914* (Göttingen, 1970), pp. 133-134.

² "Domestic Causes of the First World War," *The Responsibility of Power*, ed. Leonard Krieger and Fritz Stern (New York, 1967), p. 297.

³ Eley, *Reshaping the German Right: Radical Nationalism and Political Change after Bismarck* (New Haven, 1980), p. 351.

more extreme interpretations, has concluded that war broke out largely because the German government failed to function effectively in 1914, leaving Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg unable to resist the influence of the military.⁴ In the meantime other historians have shed welcome light on particular crises, institutions, and individuals important to German foreign policy in the years 1897–1914: Dirk Stegmann on the role of interest groups, Klaus Wernecke on the press and public opinion, Heiner Raulff on the first Moroccan crisis, Barbara Vogel on German-Russian relations, Raymond Poidevin on Franco-German economic and financial rivalries, Isabel Hull on the emperor and his entourage, Peter Winzen on Bernhard von Bülow, and Konrad Jarausch on Bethmann Hollweg.⁵

Unquestionably the German government in the years 1897–1914 carefully considered foreign policy initiatives in light of their domestic consequences. Yet on the whole recent literature has distorted the domestic aims which foreign policy was designed to achieve before 1914, misunderstood the goals of *Weltpolitik* as originally adopted in 1897, and obscured the real reasons for the 1914 decisions that helped unleash a world war.⁶ Insufficient attention has also been given to the critically different approaches of the last two prewar chancellors, Bülow and Bethmann Hollweg.

Thus, although the government did adopt *Weltpolitik* in 1897 largely for domestic reasons, both its intended domestic function and its actual

⁴ Wolfgang Mommsen, "Domestic Factors in German Foreign Policy Before 1914," *Central European History* 6: 1 (March 1973): 11–43.

⁵ Dirk Stegmann, *Die Erben Bismarcks. Parteien und Verbände in der Spätphase des Wilhelminischen Deutschlands 1897–1918* (Cologne and Berlin, 1970); Klaus Wernecke, *Der Wille zur Weltgeltung. Aussenpolitik und Öffentlichkeit im Kaiserreich am Vorabend des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Düsseldorf, 1969); Heiner Raulff, *Zwischen Machtpolitik und Imperialismus. Die deutsche Frankreichpolitik 1904–05* (Düsseldorf, 1976); B. Vogel, *Deutsche Russlandpolitik. Das Scheitern der deutschen Weltpolitik unter Bülow* (Düsseldorf, 1973); Raymond Poidevin, *Les relations économiques et financières entre la France et l'Allemagne de 1898 à 1914* (Paris, 1969); Isabel V. Hull, *The Entourage of Kaiser Wilhelm II 1888–1918* (New York, 1982); Peter Winzen, *Bülow's Weltmachtkonzept* (Boppard am Rhein, 1977); Konrad Jarausch, *The Enigmatic Chancellor. Bethmann Hollweg and the Hubris of Imperial Germany* (New Haven, 1973). Another important addition to the literature is *Kaiser Wilhelm II. New Interpretations. The Corfu Papers*, ed. John C. G. Röhl and Nicolaus Sombart (New York, 1982).

⁶ Since our concern is with alternative explanations of German foreign policy before 1914 the question of Germany's responsibility for the war relative to that of other powers is momentarily being left open. Few historians would now deny that Germany bore substantial responsibility for the conflict; whether Berlin was principally responsible will be discussed later.

political effects have been vastly exaggerated. Bülow, Alfred von Tirpitz, and the other originators of this policy never believed that it could maintain the conservative aristocracy in a position of unquestioned political preeminence and never intended to use it in this way. The umbrella of *Weltpolitik* covered a series of bargains among a wide spectrum of interest groups, and the new foreign policy did not make the task of satisfying the empire's different constituencies much easier. Nor did the government regard war as a useful means of dealing with Germany's domestic difficulties; Bülow on the contrary realized that war was more likely to exacerbate these problems than to solve them, even if Germany won. Bülow's foreign policy goals were also moderate. The vagueness of the stated aims of *Weltpolitik* reflected a real lack of any specific goals; the German government generally contented itself with modest overseas gains, desiring only to show that Germany was keeping up in the continuing worldwide struggle for territory and influence. No pro-war consensus developed in Berlin in any of the major pre-1914 crises. Bülow encouraged the ideal of *Weltpolitik*, but never allowed it to carry him away.

Under Bethmann Hollweg *Weltpolitik* was of considerably less domestic use; after 1909 new cleavages within German society and politics made it impossible for the government to use foreign policy to increase its domestic support. Bethmann too feared the domestic consequences of war, and knew in 1914 that a conflict was likely to weaken Germany's political structure rather than strengthen it. But Bethmann in 1914 risked war because of a mistaken belief that Germany's international position demanded it. Sharing the widespread conviction that German expansion was necessary and estimating that Germany's chances for success were diminishing, the chancellor made decisions that led directly to war.

Undoubtedly the adoption of *Weltpolitik* in 1897 did grow out of a crisis in domestic policy, and the men who assumed control of the German government in that year—Bülow and Tirpitz, the Imperial Secretaries of State for Foreign Affairs and for the Navy, and Prussian Finance Minister Johannes Miquel—certainly took that crisis most seriously. Yet the crisis had relatively little to do with the consequences of industrialization in Germany, and still less to do with any imminent Social Democratic threat to the structure of German society and government. Rather it involved a breakdown of confidence among institutions and individuals whose cooperation was necessary if the government of the empire was to function: the parties in the Reichstag, the south German states, the chancellor and his state secretaries, and above all, the emperor himself. Conservative agrarian anger over Caprivi's trade treaties threatened the government far less seriously than the attitude of William II, who resented Chancellor Hohenlohe's subservience to the Reichstag and the Center

Party, demanded the construction of a much larger fleet, and called for a stronger line against the Social Democrats. William's frequent attempts to conduct foreign policy over the heads of the Foreign Office were making the government's situation untenable. More serious yet, William's extravagant utterances, including his statement to fellow princes in early 1897 that Bismarck had been a pygmy beside William I and his discussion of a coup d'état with the Grand Duke of Baden, had alarmed the south German states to the point that the Prussian minister to Bavaria regarded the disintegration of the Reich as a real possibility.⁷ William's behavior had also led some Center Party leaders to suggest that it was high time for Germany to become a parliamentary regime.⁸

How was this crisis to be dealt with? Some of the Kaiser's more extreme advisers like General Alfred von Waldersee and Philipp Eulenburg called for a coup d'état, and William himself seems at the very least to have wanted to increase the government's authority over the Reichstag. The context of his late 1895 remark, "Bülow will be my Bismarck," indicates that he had in mind the Iron Chancellor's role in bringing the Prussian Landtag in line during the constitutional conflict.⁹ But the more sensible bureaucrats—who as we shall see never surrendered control of German policy before 1914—realized that Germany had to retain its limited constitutional government. "You instinctively incline to an autocratic regime," wrote Friedrich von Holstein to Eulenburg in 1896. "I am in favor of a moderate use of a practicable system of constitutional cooperative government which, with the exception of St. Petersburg and Constantinople, is in operation in the rest of the European and civilized world."¹⁰ And although Bülow himself argued in 1897 that the chancellor must serve the emperor rather than the Reichstag, he clearly intended to reconcile the upper and middle classes and the emperor within the framework of the existing regime. Not only did he too oppose a coup d'état, he also refused to become excessively alarmed by the rise of socialism.¹¹

⁷ Winzen, *Bülow's Weltmachtkonzept*, pp. 36–38, shows that Bülow during the 1890s was also seriously concerned by the danger of the disintegration of the empire.

⁸ See J. C. G. Röhl, *Germany without Bismarck. The Crisis of Government in the Second Reich, 1890–1900* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967), pp. 156–175, 212–222. Eley, *Reshaping the German Right*, and David Blackbourn, *Class, Religion and Local Politics in Wilhelmine Germany. The Center Party in Württemberg before 1914* (New Haven, 1980), have both argued that increased mass participation in German political life also helped produce a crisis in the late 1890s.

⁹ Quoted in Röhl, *Germany Without Bismarck*, p. 158.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

¹¹ Kathy Lerman, "The Decisive Relationship: Kaiser Wilhelm II and Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow, 1900–05," *Kaiser Wilhelm II*, pp. 221–47; Winzen, *Bülow's Weltmachtkonzept*, pp. 38–40.

The construction of a fleet and the inauguration of a more active foreign policy had been demanded for some time by radical nationalists, many academics, and the emperor himself, all of whom believed that a state of Germany's size and wealth required a larger navy and empire.¹² But from the standpoint of the government the Navy Law's most important function was to reconcile the emperor, the government, the Reichstag, the south German states, and public opinion. Bülow, who had shown little interest in a large fleet before his appointment as state secretary for foreign affairs in 1897, quickly discovered that Wilhelm would insist upon one; by the following year he could write that the new Navy Law "would be a tremendous triumph and would benefit our trade, our security, our future and above all the person of our dear Kaiser."¹³ By securing the passage of the law Bülow and Tirpitz bolstered the emperor's confidence in themselves and in the Reichstag. Even their continuing dependence on the Center seemed less reprehensible after the 1898 bill passed with the support of two-thirds of the Center deputies.¹⁴ Its passage showed that the emperor, the government, and the parties could work together, and thereby eased the immediate crisis.

When however one asks whether *Weltpolitik* involved a basic change in the power base upon which the government relied or even strengthened the government's electoral base, the answer must be in the negative. *Weltpolitik* was not a magic wand capable of making the government's problems disappear. Instead it served as a patriotic umbrella underneath which Bülow bought off all the major parties and interest groups with other concessions. Johannes von Miquel's *Sammlungspolitik* brought together agrarian Conservatives and heavy industry behind a program of high tariffs. Bülow also wooed the Conservatives with a more strenuous anti-Polish policy, while heavy industry profited from the construction of the fleet. But these measures did *not* turn industrialists and landowners into reliable government supporters. The Prussian Conservatives defeated the government's canal bill in 1899 after a bitter struggle, and heavy industry was complaining about the government's liberal social policy by 1901.¹⁵ Bülow in any case never dreamed that he could rely on such a narrow political base.¹⁶ The support of the Center remained critical, and the new state secretary of the interior, Arthur von Posadowsky-

¹² Winzen, *Bülow's Weltmachtkonzept*, pp. 62–64, 69–73.

¹³ Röhl, *Germany Without Bismarck*, p. 253.

¹⁴ Winzen, *Bülow's Weltmachtkonzept*, pp. 83–86. For its part the Center was more than willing to collaborate with the government in an effort to improve the social and economic lot of German Catholics; see Blackbourn, *Class, Religion and Local Politics in Wilhelmine Germany*, pp. 23–60.

¹⁵ Stegmann, *Die Erben Bismarcks*, pp. 131–39.

¹⁶ Winzen, *Bülow's Weltmachtkonzept*, p. 428.

Wehner, worked closely with the Center in designing new social legislation during the next ten years.¹⁷ The south German states also had to be conciliated, and the Bavarian Max von Thielmann became Reich state secretary of the treasury. Alfred Krupp, a major beneficiary of the Navy Law, started the newspaper *Süddeutsche Korrespondenz* to help increase patriotic feeling outside Prussia.¹⁸ The electoral effects of *Weltpolitik* were limited indeed. In 1893 the four major Reichstag parties that had supported the Navy Law—Conservatives, Free Conservatives, National Liberals, and the Center—had won 249 seats. They won 227 seats in 1898 and 226 in 1903. Many leaders of extraparliamentary organizations such as the Navy League and the Pan-German League had higher hopes for *Weltpolitik*; they wanted the fleet and other national issues to override the various sectional, religious, and political cleavages that still divided the empire. But although the German government's adoption of *Weltpolitik* enabled the Navy League in particular to form and flourish, the government did not share its visionary goals. To Bülow's government *Weltpolitik* was the occasion for a new series of bargains among entrenched interests and institutions which left the Reich government—the chancellor, the secretaries of state, and the emperor—in a significantly stronger position than hitherto.¹⁹

More important to the issue of the origins of the First World War is the question of whether *Weltpolitik* made war more likely. Given that William, Bülow, Tirpitz, and Miquel had decided upon a more active world policy largely for domestic reasons, was war part of their plan? This question can be answered in two ways: by delving into the foreign policy goals of the German leadership at the time *Weltpolitik* was introduced, and by studying their behavior during the decade after the introduction of the First Navy Law. Both approaches—and especially the second—suggest that the originators of *Weltpolitik* looked forward to a series of small-scale, marginal foreign policy successes, not to a major war.

It is highly significant that the exhaustive researches of the last twenty years have not made it possible to say just what the foreign policy goals of *Weltpolitik* were. Bülow in particular seems to have avoided putting any specific ideas about Germany's future on paper,²⁰ and Tirpitz had

¹⁷ Tirpitz also made significant concessions to win the Center's assent to the second Navy Law of 1900; *ibid.*, pp. 108–126.

¹⁸ Röhl, *Germany without Bismarck*, pp. 223–251.

¹⁹ Eley, *Reshaping the German Right*, pp. 167–84, shows that Bülow fought efforts of extreme Navy League nationalists to turn the navy into a weapon against the “anti-national” Center.

²⁰ Winzen, *Bülow's Weltmachtkonzept*, pp. 431–32.

only slightly more to say. In the late 1890s both argued that Germany's population and industrial growth required both a fleet and a larger colonial empire. Most educated Germans seem to have shared this belief. During the 1890s, when recovery from the great depression was by no means secure and France and the United States were raising tariffs, the problem of foreign markets seemed serious. Even Caprivi, an opponent of *Weltpolitik*, had believed it necessary to secure a larger industrial market for Germany, though he preferred to look for it in Central Europe. Still, the extremely limited economic significance of the territories the Germans actually tried to acquire after 1897 suggests that the government did not regard new colonial markets as a really urgent necessity, and as Germany's foreign trade grew steadily during the 1900s this need undoubtedly seemed even less acute.

Recent work has emphasized the Anglophobic character of *Weltpolitik*, arguing that Bülow and Tirpitz were preparing for an eventual trial of strength with Britain. Certainly the decision to build the fleet immediately affected Anglo-German relations. Peter Winzen and Paul Kennedy have shown how Bülow decided that in the short run British feelers for an Anglo-German alliance had to be rejected, since Germany could not yet secure favorable terms.²¹ Yet whether Tirpitz or Bülow actually envisioned an eventual war with Britain is much more difficult to say. In order to justify the expense of the fleet Tirpitz had no choice but to speak in terms of an eventual clash with Britain; otherwise his beloved battleships would have no real use. We shall see that he sang another tune when war with England loomed as a real possibility. Nor must Bülow's diplomatic tactics necessarily have harbored sinister intentions. While rejecting an alliance with Britain he did not exclude cooperative arrangements. In 1900 he was more than ready to join London in a partition of the Portuguese empire.²² His reserve towards London can just as easily be regarded as an attempt to make a virtue of necessity. The state of German public opinion in the era of the Boer War probably made an alliance with England impossible anyway.

Bülow's policy excluded either an alliance with Britain or an imminent clash; no evidence suggests that he aimed at an actual diplomatic or military victory over the United Kingdom. His speeches and private remarks during the early years of *Weltpolitik* do tend to cast England as both the leading world power and the principal obstacle to German world policy, yet they do not in any way deny the legitimacy of the British

²¹ Ibid., pp. 80–81, 293–353; Kennedy, *Anglo-German Antagonism*, pp. 226–27.

²² Winzen, *Bülow's Weltmachtkonzept*, pp. 265–77.

Empire or imply that its size should be reduced. His principal concern, as expressed in a December 1899 Reichstag speech introducing the Second Navy Law, was that Germany not be left behind in the division of the world's weaker empires. He frequently referred to the Spanish-American War as the event which had exposed Germany's weaknesses most clearly; had we been stronger at sea, he seems to imply, we might have profited from the conflict ourselves. The fleet, one might infer from the speech, was not designed to challenge the British Empire directly but to make sure that Germany secured its rightful inheritance when some of Lord Salisbury's "dying nations"—the Portuguese, Ottoman, and Chinese empires probably figured most prominently in Bülow's mind—finally expired.²³ In this and other speeches Bülow also tended to place the government midway between those who argued that Berlin had done too much to protect Germany's overseas interests and those who asked that they be pursued with greater zeal.²⁴

The conduct of the German government in the years after 1897 suggests that Bülow sought relatively cheap successes that would impress the emperor and German opinion without carrying any real risk of war. The actual colonial territory which Bülow seized at Kiaochow and in the Pacific lacked great strategic or economic significance, yet helped focus public opinion upon "the world-shaking and decisive problems of foreign policy." "This gain will stimulate people and navy to follow your Majesty further along the path which leads to world power, greatness and eternal glory," Bülow wrote William publicly on the occasion of the seizure of the worthless Caroline Islands.²⁵ Russia, he wrote Holstein in August of 1901, could receive a share of the Baghdad railway, but "anything which might look like a retreat, or worse, a defeat for German policy in Asia Minor must be carefully avoided in this. On the contrary the matter should be dressed up as renewed proof of the skill with which the men in charge of our foreign policy furthered Germany's world interests without endangering our good relations with our neighbors."²⁶ Appearances, in

²³ For the speech and some very interesting commentaries see *Rhetorik und Weltpolitik. Eine interdisziplinäre Untersuchung politischer Reden von W. E. Gladstone, J. Chamberlain und B. v. Bülow*, ed. Helmut Wiebrock (Wiesbaden, 1974), pp. 145–192.

²⁴ See his confidential remarks to the Reichstag budget committee on March 27–28, 1900, quoted in Winzen, *Bülow's Weltmachtkonzept*, pp. 120–22, and his Reichstag remarks of March 3, 1902, Winzen, "Prince Bülow's *Weltmacht-politik*," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 22: 2 (August 1976): 239.

²⁵ Kennedy, *Anglo-German Antagonism*, pp. 365, 236.

²⁶ Norman Rich and M. H. Fisher, eds., *The Holstein Papers* (Cambridge, 1963), 4: 784.

short, were more important than realities. Tirpitz was even more cautious. While eager to stress the long-term threat from England in order to justify the fleet, he opposed the seizure of Kiaochow on the grounds that it involved an excessive risk of a conflict with Russia.

The real nature of Bülow's policy definitely emerged during the years 1904–06, when the Russo-Japanese War, the Anglo-French entente, and French moves into Morocco threatened to transform the international situation. Recent monographs have stressed Germany's efforts during these years to bring about a dramatic change in the European balance of power, and specifically to conclude a Russo-German alliance and break or weaken the Anglo-French entente.²⁷ The German government, however, pursued these aims without losing sight of important constraints. Berlin's more aggressive policies sometimes seemed to increase the danger of a European war, but no consensus in favor of war ever emerged within the Imperial government. *Weltpolitik* remained a policy of limited risks and limited aims.

With respect to the Russo-Japanese War, Bülow clearly welcomed the conflict and hoped to benefit from it even before it had begun. "From the point of view of our internal politics and to counteract the general dissatisfaction in Germany," he wrote Holstein in January 1904, "it would of course be a good thing if 'somewhere far away' the nations came to blows."²⁸ The war would also sharpen the conflict between Russia and "England-America," which Bülow clearly regarded as an advantage, and could break up the Dual Alliance, since France would not join Russia in a war against England. When in October 1904 the Dogger Bank incident threatened to bring England into the war Bülow decided the time was ripe for an actual Russo-German alliance which France would subsequently be forced to join. German offers of an alliance in October of 1904 and July 1905 got nowhere because only the tsar among the responsible Russian officials seemed interested. Yet the resistance within the German government to such a drastic reorientation of policy is equally significant. When Bülow put the question of the alliance before a council of ministers on October 26, 1904, Tirpitz, despite his support of an eventual Russo-German alliance, argued that at the present moment it would only provoke an English attack against which Russia would be no help whatever. Chief of the General Staff Count Alfred von Schlieffen also doubted the military benefits of such an alliance; should England attack Germany he regarded a Russian move against India as unlikely. Holstein supported Bülow's suggestion, but

²⁷ Vogel, *Deutsche Russlandpolitik*; Raulff, *Machtpolitik und Imperialismus*.

²⁸ Holstein Papers, 4: 818.

State Secretary for Foreign Affairs Oswald von Richthofen agreed with Tirpitz.²⁹ Bülow himself came to share the view that such an alliance would not be worth the risk of war. "One thing is certain," he wrote Holstein on December 13: "while an agreement with Russia safeguarding the peace and raising our position in the world would be a great success for our foreign policy and would be welcomed in wide and in the best circles as a return to the traditions of Bismarckian policy, a bond with Russia which would in contrast to this draw England's hostility upon us would certainly be condemned unanimously by the whole nation, by the German Princes first of all."³⁰ Neither the chancellor, nor the Foreign Office, nor the army, nor the navy were in the least anxious for war.

German policy during the Moroccan crisis also shied away from any risk of war. Having failed to weaken England's position by concluding an alliance with Russia, the German government—led in this instance by Holstein—decided to strike a blow at the new Anglo-French entente by showing the French that they could not rely upon British support to realize their colonial aims. They did *not*, it is clear, act on behalf of German commercial interests in Morocco, who had no objection to working with the French.³¹ Nor did they want concrete territorial gains. While William and certain Foreign Office officials had toyed with the idea of asking for compensation in the Canary Islands should France and Spain partition Morocco, Holstein and Bülow simply wanted to bring France in line by forcing the French to submit the Morocco question to a conference.³² As usual, prestige—both domestic and foreign—remained the key consideration. Significantly, after Delcassé resigned in June 1905 and Rouvier agreed to a conference the following month, both Bülow and William concluded that they had achieved their aims. Holstein disagreed, believing that France must be forced to make major concessions, but he could not carry the day, and his failure to convince his superiors to hold to an uncompromising policy helped lead to his resignation.³³

No one within the German government pushed for a war over Morocco. Though neither Raulff nor Kennedy has discovered any specific statement of Tirpitz's opinion, the latter reasonably assumes that his attitude towards a war involving England—in which the Imperial Navy would have no chance—was no more favorable than in the fall of 1904.³⁴ Count von

²⁹ Vogel, *Deutsche Russlandpolitik*, pp. 206–212.

³⁰ *Holstein Papers*, 4: 867.

³¹ Raulff, *Machtpolitik und Imperialismus*, pp. 123–25.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 54–55.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 105–106, 123; see also Norman Rich, *Friedrich von Holstein* (Cambridge, 1965), 2: 696–745.

³⁴ Kennedy, *Anglo-German Antagonism*, p. 276. Tirpitz's failure to express a written opinion could also be interpreted as evidence that the question was never seriously raised.

Schlieffen noted that this would be a favorable moment for a war with France, but this was not much more than a statement of the obvious, and Prussian War Minister Karl von Einem argued on the contrary that German artillery was not ready for war.³⁵ William characteristically ran hot and cold; his threats sometimes frightened the French, but his eagerness for a settlement frequently showed through. And while Holstein continually insisted on securing real concessions from France, his letters in June 1905 show that he wanted a successful conference, not a Franco-German war which he suspected England of trying to bring about.³⁶ He had earlier given another reason for a reserved policy: that the emperor, in case of European complications, would unconditionally reserve for himself the military command, "which, since he is entirely incapable militarily, must lead to horrible catastrophes."³⁷ Bülow favored a settlement with France as early as July 1905, and in February 1906 he summarized his position. "Everything depends on our seizing the right moment for an acceptable compromise," he wrote Holstein. "We cannot tolerate a humiliation. The failure of the conference would be, no matter how one looked at it, a diplomatic setback for us. Neither public opinion, Parliament, Princes, or even the army will have anything to do with a war over Morocco."³⁸

Of particular interest in light of recent historiography is the general agreement that a war over Morocco would not be popular. The concurrent colonial war in southwest Africa had not been a public relations success and the German press did not regard Morocco as a proper *casus belli*. Even conservative papers pointed to the Russian Revolution as evidence that war must not be undertaken without a firm patriotic basis, and War Minister Einem noted that the Morocco issue lacked the necessary "integrating power."³⁹ Under the circumstances the outcome of the crisis was virtually a foregone conclusion. After the government avoided a breakdown of the Algeciras conference by making substantial concessions to the French, Bülow painted the outcome in rosy colors for the press and parliament.

During his remaining three years in power Bülow continued to exploit *Weltpolitik* domestically while abandoning any attempt to transform the international situation. In late 1906 he faced a dilemma similar to that of 1897; the emperor had again become angry at the government's dependence upon the Reichstag, and especially upon the Center Party.

³⁵ Raulff, *Machtpolitik und Imperialismus*, pp. 130–33.

³⁶ *Holstein Papers*, 4: 891, 897.

³⁷ Raulff, *Machtpolitik und Imperialismus*, p. 73 n.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 123–25; *Holstein Papers*, 4: 936.

³⁹ Raulff, *Machtpolitik und Imperialismus*, pp. 80, 133–44.

When the Center suddenly joined the Social Democrats in opposition to the war in southwest Africa Bülow dissolved the Reichstag and turned the ensuing election into a referendum on *Weltpolitik*. Critical to the government's success were the left liberal parties, which adopted a pro-government stance in foreign policy and generally refused to support Social Democrats in the second round of the Reichstag elections. As a result the Social Democratic representation fell from eighty-one seats to just forty-three, and Bülow formed a government majority that entirely excluded the Center.⁴⁰ The elections reaffirmed the country's support for *Weltpolitik* and the government's independence of any particular party.

Despite this brilliant success, the weaknesses of *Weltpolitik* both as a foreign and as a domestic strategy began to emerge during the remaining three years of Bülow's chancellorship. By the time he left office in 1909 Bülow had decided that naval construction, in particular, had to be curtailed. He had also become even more convinced that war could *never* serve either the domestic or the foreign policy interests of the German government. The chancellor had questioned whether the fleet program would ever improve Germany's external situation as early as 1907, but new English construction, popular pressure, and the enthusiasm of the emperor forced him to endorse new increases in the navy in the following year. By 1908–09 he had definitely decided that the naval game was not worth the candle. In August of 1908 he made clear in letters to Holstein that he favored an eventual naval agreement in order to avoid a hopeless war with England, although as always he emphasized that Germany must never seem to yield to foreign pressure. Bülow's warnings to William against closing the door to naval conversations, which V. R. Berghahn interprets simply as a ploy to reassure London that Germany did not plan war, actually reflected his intention of making a deal when agitation had died down.⁴¹

Significantly, Bülow now regarded a naval slowdown as essential for domestic as well as foreign policy reasons. The financial burden of naval armaments had become intolerable. In the midst of drawing up the financial reform, including an inheritance tax, which was eventually to destroy his coalition and lead to his fall, Bülow repeated again and again that Germany could not afford the world's largest army, a huge navy, and the world's most expensive social policy. He clearly intended to reduce naval expenditures by insisting on the priority of the army. The German

⁴⁰ George Dunlap Crothers, *The German Elections of 1907* (New York, 1941), passim. The Socialists' recent discussions of a mass strike probably frightened away some voters as well.

⁴¹ Berghahn, *Germany and the Approach of War*, pp. 64–69.

government's perennial deficit had to be eliminated; while the fleet itself insured the antagonism of England and increased the danger of war, the loans necessary to finance it robbed Germany of an important means of extending its influence peacefully. "It is increasingly clear to me," he wrote Holstein in September 1908, "what this reform of our finances will mean not only economically and militarily, but also purely diplomatically. The undiminished enormous influence of France, her unshakable prestige, is not only the result of her military strength nor even of her culture and language, but is to a great extent the product of her wealth of capital and its liquidity. That is the primary reason for the French influence in Spain, Italy, Russia, and many other countries. Now the French are trying to find a financial wedge in Hungary. That will emerge more clearly the longer we continue our miserable economic dependence on loans and contributions from the individual German states."⁴²

Bülow, then, had set upon a course of financial reform at home, naval limitation and improved relations with Britain to reduce the danger of war, and a gradual expansion of German influence in the world at large. The question of war and peace arose once again in early 1909 as a result of the Bosnian crisis. Helmuth von Moltke, the new chief of the general staff, regarded the European situation as propitious for war, and some army officers apparently felt that a war might provide the occasion for a coup d'état. Knowing, as did all Europe, that Russia could not fight a war, Bülow characteristically scored a cheap diplomatic success by issuing his March 1909 ultimatum. Only a year later he admitted that this was more a triumph of style than of substance: "I considered," he wrote, "... that we would break the net of encirclement which existed more in imagination than in fact."⁴³ Yet his attitude towards war had not changed. In October 1908, during a minor crisis over Morocco which eventually concluded with a new Franco-German agreement, the crown prince reproached Bülow for an insufficiently vigorous defense of German interests and an excessive love of peace, adding that "a great part of the nation thinks as I do, and the whole army is longing to 'get at 'em.' " Bülow's reply deserves to be quoted at some length.

. . . I entirely agree with Your Imperial and Royal Highness that it is inadvisable too frequently to express one's love of peace, since this gives others too great a feeling of self-assurance. I too am convinced that, if a case involves one's country's honor, it is necessary to strike, *coûte que coûte*, and whatever the chances may seem to be. But, unless our honor is engaged, we should always ask ourselves what is to be expected from a war. No war in Europe can bring us much. There

⁴² *Holstein Papers*, 4: 1128; see also pp. 1117 and 1120.

⁴³ Jarausch, *The Enigmatic Chancellor*, p. 62.

would be nothing for us to gain in the conquest of any fresh Slav or French territory.⁴⁴ If we annex small countries to the Empire we shall only strengthen those centrifugal elements which, alas, are never wanting in Germany. . . .

In 1866 and 1870 there was a great prize to be won. Today that is no longer the case. Above all, we ought never to forget that nowadays no war can be declared unless a whole people is convinced that such a war is necessary and just. A war, lightly provoked, even if it were fought successfully, would have a bad effect on the country; while if it ended in defeat, it might entail the fall of the dynasty. History shows us that every great war is followed by a period of liberalism, since a people demands compensation for the sacrifices and effort war has entailed. But any war which ends in a defeat obliges the dynasty that declared it to make concessions which before would have seemed unheard of. . . . In affairs of this kind the opinion of the army cannot be decisive. It is excellent, no doubt, that the army should not feel its sword has rusted in the scabbard: it is necessary even that soldiers should be bellicose. But the task of a leader of policy is to get a clear view of consequences. *Quidquid agis, prudenter agas et respice finem!* [Whoever would act, act prudently and consider the consequences.]⁴⁵

This letter addresses every motive for war that historians have ascribed to the Imperial German governmental elite. To the claim that democratization might thereby be checked Bülow replied that even a victorious war would result in more concessions to the people, while a defeat might lead to something much worse. While noting that the military generally tended towards war, he stressed the responsibility of the political authorities. Responding implicitly to suggestions that Germany should expand in Europe, he argued that new subjects would be as troublesome as the Alsace-Lorrainers and Poles. If he did not mention colonies, it was because, as he did say, England would be among Germany's enemies, and none would be acquired. Diplomatic successes and colonial acquisitions might help the government; war would not. *Weltpolitik* was simply one aspect of a broad strategy to hold the German Empire together and govern it effectively, and Bülow correctly estimated that war would exacerbate Germany's domestic difficulties without winning any worthwhile prizes.

By 1909 Tirpitz had also shown himself deeply averse to war, certainly in the short run and probably in the long as well. Tirpitz never tired of discussing the foreign and domestic benefits that his fleet was certain to bring to Germany; only in this way could he justify its cost. Yet it became clear—as he repeatedly stated during one crisis after another that the fleet was not yet ready for war and ignored the evidence that Germany could never overcome British numerical superiority—that for him the

⁴⁴ Winzen, "Prince Bülow's *Weltmachtkonzept*," p. 238, states that Bülow never showed any interest in continental expansion.

⁴⁵ *Memoirs of Prince von Bülow* (Boston, 1931), 2: 458–61.

navy was not a means, but an end.⁴⁶ A true cold warrior, he continually stressed England's supposed threat to Germany's world position to justify the fleet's existence while pushing the date of any clash of arms further and further into the future.⁴⁷ From time to time the grand admiral sought new pretexts for the construction of the fleet, including a proposed law to make all overseas Germans citizens of the empire.⁴⁸ The real goal of his policy was not a victory over England, but a naval law that would guarantee him three new ships a year forever and release the navy from the effective control of the Reichstag.⁴⁹ He consistently opposed war in every crisis from 1897 through 1914, refused to risk the fleet against the British when war did come, and, after the war, blamed Bethmann Hollweg bitterly for provoking the conflict that had destroyed his life's work.⁵⁰

By the time of Bülow's resignation in 1909 the idea of the necessity of German expansion had become so deeply embedded among large segments of the German population that his government's moderate *Weltpolitik* was being seriously challenged. Thus in 1907–08 Tirpitz, bowing to the agitation of August Keim and the Navy League, had to introduce a new naval law calling for the construction of four capital ships annually through 1911, abandoning his original plan which would simply have guaranteed the construction of three ships annually for all time.⁵¹ Undoubtedly Bülow and Tirpitz had fostered the expansionist climate within Germany by embracing and implementing *Weltpolitik*, and in this sense they bear some responsibility for the eventual outbreak of war. Yet as Paul Kennedy has recently suggested, the need for German expansion was so widely accepted by the 1890s that it is almost inconceivable that any government

⁴⁶ This was clearly grasped by Bethmann, who in 1914 remarked, "For Tirpitz the Navy is an end in itself" (Kurt Riezler, *Tagebücher, Aufsätze, Dokumente*, ed. Karl Dietrich Erdmann [Göttingen, 1972], p. 188).

⁴⁷ V. R. Berghahn, *Rüstung und Machtpolitik. Zur Anatomie des "Kalten Krieges" vor 1914* (Düsseldorf, 1973) draws several interesting analogies between the Anglo-German and postwar Soviet-American arms races.

⁴⁸ Holstein to Bülow, August 25, 1908, *Holstein Papers*, 4: 1121. According to Holstein, only Bethmann Hollweg of all the other ministers supported this law.

⁴⁹ V. R. Berghahn, *Der Tirpitz-Plan. Genesis und Verfall einer innenpolitischen Krisenstrategie unter Wilhelm II*, passim. Berghahn in my opinion overemphasizes the significance of Tirpitz's professed domestic political goals.

⁵⁰ Kennedy, *Anglo-German Antagonism*, p. 422.

⁵¹ Berghahn, *Der Tirpitz-Plan*, pp. 505–591. Tirpitz especially regretted the new law because it left a five-year gap, beginning in 1912, during which construction would drop to two ships annually, and would therefore necessitate yet another naval law. Keim and the Navy League did not share his overriding interest in freeing the navy from parliamentary control once and for all.

could have forsaken such policies entirely.⁵² In this context Bülow deserves credit for recognizing that the gains of expansion had to be balanced against the possibly disastrous consequences of precipitate action, never forgetting the essential strength of Germany's international position, and contenting himself with cheap successes. Bülow's successor lacked his understanding of the subtleties of *Weltpolitik* and of the impossibility of Germany's gaining anything meaningful from a new war.

The German government did *not* help precipitate a world war in 1914 because Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg regarded war as a useful solution to his domestic difficulties, or because the 1912 elections, in which the Social Democrats became the largest party in the Reichstag, left the governing elite with no option but to embark upon a risky foreign adventure. The record of Bethmann's chancellorship shows that he was not especially concerned by any Social Democratic threat, that he was no longer able to use foreign policy to solve domestic political problems, that his government became more rather than less effective as a result of the 1912 election, and that he anticipated that war would tend to overturn the status quo rather than maintain it. Yet despite all this, in 1914 Bethmann knowingly pursued policies carrying with them a substantial risk of world war. He did so because he believed more deeply than his predecessor in the inadequacy of Germany's international position, and because he failed to understand the chancellor's critical role within the Imperial German government.

Like Bülow in 1897, Bethmann in 1909 assumed power during a domestic political crisis. Yet Bethmann's problems, like Bülow's, had little to do with Social Democracy; they stemmed from right-wing attempts to maintain the status quo rather than left-wing attempts to overturn it. Tension had begun building up after the formation of the Bülow bloc of Conservatives, Free Conservatives, National Liberals, and Progressives in 1907. The National Liberals, led by Ernst Bassermann and Gustav Stresemann, set the tone of the bloc's domestic policy. They had no wish to overturn or democratize the political structure of the empire, but they deeply resented the exclusion of the upper bourgeoisie from the leadership of the government, the civil service, and the army, and fought for a more equal distribution of both the burdens and rewards of Imperial life.⁵³ Bülow did little to broaden his administration's social base, but he clearly agreed

⁵² Paul Kennedy, "The Kaiser and German *Weltpolitik*: Reflexions on Wilhelm II's Place in the Making of German Foreign Policy," *Kaiser Wilhelm II*, pp. 148–152.

⁵³ See especially Theodor Eschenburg, *Das Kaiserreich am Scheideweg. Bassermann, Bülow und der Block* (Berlin, 1929), pp. 20–25, and Beverly Heckart, *From Bassermann to Bebel* (New Haven, 1974), pp. 124–134.

that the Conservatives must pay more Imperial taxes. Thus in 1909 he made the introduction of a lineal inheritance tax a question of confidence and submitted his resignation when the Center and Conservatives managed to defeat it.

As Bülow had already predicted,⁵⁴ the rest of the nation immediately turned bitterly against the Conservatives. The Center-Conservative decision to rely on indirect taxes to close the imperial deficit—including taxes on securities transactions—led to a liberal resurgence. In 1909 industry, commerce, and finance formed the *Hansabund* to press for more equal taxation. Although heavy industrialists regarded this merely as a temporary maneuver and preferred their old alliance with the Conservatives, the success of the *Hansabund* showed that its demands had struck a responsive chord among the German middle classes. The question of a new tariff also divided conservatives and liberals. As Bülow's trade treaties neared expiration the agrarians and heavy industry asked for new increases, while financial and commercial interests committed themselves to current levels. For the time being the political leadership of the bourgeoisie unquestionably regarded the Conservatives and their Center allies as more serious enemies than the Social Democrats.⁵⁵ In these circumstances the government could not use foreign policy to build an anti-Socialist front.

Though forced temporarily to rely upon a Conservative-Center coalition, Bethmann Hollweg saw which way the political wind was blowing. Like his predecessor, Bethmann was only a very moderate reformer. He regarded the Conservatives as a critical though irresponsible pillar of the state, he defended the emperor in public even when he completely disagreed with him, and he resolutely opposed the parliamentarization or democratization of the empire. Still, he conceived the reconciliation of the National Liberals, Center, and Conservatives as his principal task, to "make possible the concrete cooperation of all bourgeois [semble bürgerlich] parties," and he recognized that it was the Conservatives who were standing in his way.⁵⁶ His 1910 proposals for the reform of the Prussian suffrage reflected these aims perfectly: in no way democratic, they aimed at manipulating the existing system so as to give the middle class more representation. The obstinacy of the Conservatives, which brought even these minor changes to grief, confirmed Bethmann's prejudice against them: "Perhaps they will first have to pass through the hard

⁵⁴ Eley, *Reshaping the German Right*, p. 315.

⁵⁵ See Stegmann, *Erben Bismarcks*, pp. 176–95.

⁵⁶ Jarausch, *The Enigmatic Chancellor*, pp. 71–73, 84–88.

school of Reichstag elections," he commented, before they would see reason.⁵⁷

In 1911 Alfred von Kiderlen-Wächter, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, revived the idea of using a foreign policy success to benefit the government electorally, but his attempt was a disastrous failure. When France's intention to establish full political control over Morocco became clear he suggested the dispatch of warships to secure compensation, adding in conclusion that such a step could have favorable domestic effects: "With the sole exception of the Social Democratic Party public opinion at home would seriously blame the Imperial government if it allowed events in the Sharif Kingdom merely to take their course whereas we may assume without a doubt that tangible results will change the views of many dissatisfied voters and will have a not inconsiderable effect on the outcome of the pending Reichstag elections."⁵⁸ Yet the preconditions that would have promised success for such a strategy were entirely absent.

In the election years in which the Imperial government had used foreign policy to secure a pro-government majority—1884, 1887, 1893, and 1906—issues like colonies and army bills had served to bring together parties essentially in agreement anyway while isolating parties like the Center, Progressives, or Social Democrats, who took an antinational stand. In 1911 the parties whose support Bethmann coveted—the Conservatives, Free Conservatives, National Liberals, and the Center—could be counted on to support a forward policy over Morocco. Yet in the aftermath of the breakup of the Bülow bloc such an issue could not bridge the chasm between National Liberals and Conservatives. In addition, the left-wing parties had learned their lesson. During the crisis the Social Democrats and Progressives carefully avoided any position that could be characterized as antinational.⁵⁹ Worst of all, when the government decided to accept limited gains rather than risk war with England, the right-wing parties condemned its pusillanimity. Rather than putting aside their domestic complaints the National Liberals blamed the aristocrats at the Foreign Office for a policy which in their view took insufficient account of Germany's real national interests.

Foreign policy played virtually no part in the 1912 elections. The various indirect taxes upon which the Conservatives and Center had insisted in 1909 had seriously affected the cost of living, and the National Liberals, Progressives, and Social Democrats used this issue against the

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁵⁸ Fischer, *War of Illusions*, pp. 71–73.

⁵⁹ Wernecke, *Der Wille zur Weltgeltung*, pp. 88–92.

Blue-Black bloc with devastating effect. Almost without exception these three parties joined with one another in the second round of Reichstag elections.⁶⁰ The Blue-Black bloc, which had won 219 seats in 1907, won just 167 in 1912.⁶¹ The big winners, of course, were the Social Democrats, who went from 43 seats to 110.

Recent work has assigned critical importance to the 1912 elections, arguing that they led to an important right-wing reaction, left the government in a difficult if not impossible position, and renewed interest in war as a solution to the empire's domestic problems. Undoubtedly certain right-wing interest and pressure groups were sufficiently frightened by the Social Democratic victory to consolidate their forces and make new demands upon the government. The Agrarian League, the Central Association of German Industrialists, and the Imperial League of the Middle Classes formed a new Cartel of the Productive Classes of 1913. These and other right-wing groups including the Pan-German League called for new measures against strikes and picketing, restrictive changes in Reichstag suffrage, radical anti-Semitic measures, and a cutback of the influence of the Reichstag within the government. The Pan-German leader Heinrich Class's popular pseudonymous book, *Wenn ich der Kaiser war*, linked these demands to calls for expansion abroad, and Eley has argued that a new alliance between the Cartel and the Pan-Germans now began to emerge.⁶² In late 1913 Class and the Pan-German General Konstantin von Gebsattel felt sufficiently emboldened to submit a memorandum embodying these views to the crown prince, who in turn passed it along to the chancellor and his father the emperor.⁶³

Some have argued that the Socialist victory and right-wing reaction worsened Bethmann's position and that it seriously affected his policies.⁶⁴ Yet in fact the election was neither a surprise nor a great disappointment to Bethmann, and the composition of the Reichstag allowed him to break the deadlock of 1907-11 and pass an extraordinary amount of important new legislation. Naval construction was slowed, the army was greatly expanded, and in 1913 Bethmann finally succeeded in passing a direct

⁶⁰ Jürgen Bertram, *Die Wahlen zum Deutschen Reichstag vom Jahre 1912* (Düsseldorf, 1974), pp. 167-251.

⁶¹ These figures include the anti-Semitic and other fringe conservative parties.

⁶² Stegmann, *Erben Bismarcks*, pp. 277-304, 360-68; Eley, *Reshaping the German Right*, p. 318.

⁶³ Fischer, *War of Illusions*, pp. 282-83.

⁶⁴ Thus Berghahn on the 1912 elections: "The situation which Bethmann Hollweg had been dreading since 1909 had come about" (*Germany and the Approach of War*, p. 103). Eley, *Reshaping the German Right*, p. 351, argues that new right-wing alliances "placed the government in an impossible situation."

Imperial property tax despite the opposition of the Conservatives. This did not in the least disturb him: "The tax compromise reached by the majority of the bourgeois [semble bürgerlich] parties," he commented, "may portend a gradual leveling of our political antagonisms."⁶⁵ Now that the National Liberals' main grievance had been assuaged the chancellor might reasonably look forward to a gradual renewal of cooperation among the *bürgerlich* parties and to a decline in Socialist representation at the next election. Despite the increasing right-wing hysteria Bethmann's moderate constitutional course had served him well, and the fate of the Gebtsattel memorandum indicates that he still enjoyed the emperor's essential support. In letters to the crown prince both the chancellor and the emperor blasted Gebtsattel's proposals as irresponsible fantasies.⁶⁶ In the Zabern affair Bethmann appeared to have learned from Bülow's experience in the *Daily Telegraph* affair. Recognizing that only the emperor retained the power to dismiss him, he bowed to William's wishes and defended the army's conduct in the Reichstag in complete contradiction to his real views. And although the Reichstag passed a motion of no confidence as a result, the vote did not really threaten his position. When the Social Democrats argued that the vote required Bethmann to resign, the National Liberals, Progressives, and the Center all contested this interpretation.⁶⁷

Thus during the years 1912–14 the Imperial chancellor, while rejecting any radical solutions to Germany's internal political problems, had successfully implemented several major reforms: a much larger army, slower increases in the navy, and even a role for the parties of the left in passing the new financial reforms. At home Bethmann had accomplished most of what Bülow had hoped to achieve in 1908.

In foreign policy, however, the new chancellor's policies showed a critical difference in emphasis. Perhaps because Bethmann had risen through the ranks of the domestic Prussian bureaucracy historians have tended to discount his own views on foreign policy, generally stressing only his desire for better relations with Britain. Konrad Jarausch's biography shows however that Bethmann had strong views on foreign policy and that his emphasis on an agreement with Britain was merely one

⁶⁵ Jarausch, *The Enigmatic Chancellor*, pp. 98–99.

⁶⁶ Jarausch, *The Enigmatic Chancellor*, p. 104; Hartmut Pogge-von Strandmann, "Staatstreichpläne, Alldeutsche und Bethmann Hollweg," H. Pogge-von Strandmann and Immanuel Geiss, *Die Erforderlichkeit des Unmöglichen. Deutschland am Vorabend des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Frankfurt am Main, 1965), pp. 18–26, 32–39.

⁶⁷ Heckart, *From Bassermann to Bebel*, pp. 250–257.

aspect of a far-reaching strategy for German expansion. Bethmann, in fact, was more concerned with German expansion than Bülow, who by 1909 had realized that Germany had every reason to be pleased with its position in the world and no longer felt any great urgency about improving it. Perhaps because Bethmann was not a foreign policy specialist, he accepted rather uncritically the prevailing view that Germany's world position did not correspond to its strength or interests.

Bethmann believed that Germany "must expand" in the world, specifically in central Africa and Asia Minor.⁶⁸ "For forty years," he told French Ambassador Jules Cambon in early 1914, "France has followed a grandiose policy. She has acquired an immense empire. . . . During this time an inactive Germany has not followed her example and today *she* needs a place in the sun. Germany, her unity established, sees her population grow enormously every day, her navy, her industry and her commerce show a development without equal and she is in a sense condemned to spread outwards."⁶⁹ Rejecting Tirpitz's argument that such expansion would only be possible when the German fleet was strong enough to deter the English, Bethmann shared Bülow's view that it was impossible to alter the naval balance of power and counted on persuading London that German and British interests need not clash. In early 1912 he commented to Admiral von Müller that an alliance with Britain would allow Germany to form "a great colonial empire (Portuguese colonies, Belgian Congo, Dutch colonies)."⁷⁰ By then he had begun a complex series of negotiations with London designed to precipitate the partition of the Portuguese colonies, acquire at least part of the Belgian Congo, and arrange the construction of the Baghdad railway and the corresponding division of spheres of influence in the Ottoman Empire.

But while working wholeheartedly for a colonial entente with Britain, Bethmann was willing to limit the German navy only if Germany's leverage over France and Russia could thereby be increased. The price of an Anglo-German naval agreement was a guarantee of British neutrality in a Continental war. Bethmann had sought such terms as early as 1909. In that year he had resisted Kiderlen-Wächter's suggestion that London and Berlin simply agree not to take part "in an unprovoked attack upon the other" and had insisted that Britain's neutrality obligation should

⁶⁸ Jarausch, *The Enigmatic Chancellor*, p. 110.

⁶⁹ Ministère des Affaires Étrangères. Commission de Publication des Documents Relatifs aux Origines de la Guerre de 1914, *Documents diplomatiques français*, 3rd ser. (Paris, 1929–36), 9: 177 (Cambon to Doumergue, July 28, 1914). Bethmann warned Cambon not to thwart Germany in Turkey.

⁷⁰ Fischer, *War of Illusions*, p. 259.

cover any case in which Germany had acted under the Triple Alliance. He went even further in 1912, insisting that Britain and Germany pledge one another neutrality should either "become entangled in a war with one or more powers."⁷¹ The British refused to consider this proposal in 1912, but we shall see that Bethmann reverted to it at the height of the July crisis in 1914.

Bethmann's armaments policy closely reflected his foreign policy goals. As Bülow had planned as early as 1908, Bethmann in 1912 successfully reduced the tempo of naval construction after a long struggle with Tirpitz, pleading both financial necessity and the need for a massive expansion of the army. The slowdown in naval construction kept the chances for an agreement with England alive; the army was vastly expanded for the first time in many years partly as a means to reduce naval spending, partly because of a decision within the army finally to accept more bourgeois officers, and partly because of a growing fear of French and Russian strength which Bethmann very definitely shared.⁷² But the new emphasis on the army did not reflect any renewed interest in Continental expansion. Both Bethmann's prewar statements and his war aims policy indicate that he fully appreciated the difficulties of any extension of Germany's frontiers.⁷³ The increases in the army seem instead to have been designed to extort or conquer a colonial empire on the battlefields of Europe. Once British neutrality had been purchased by naval limitations, the enlarged German army would leave France and Russia no choice but to give in in any future crisis over Asia Minor or African colonies.

The German government's determination to share in new colonial expansion brought war significantly nearer during the second Moroccan crisis, but the cautious attitudes of a few key officials still kept the peace. Kiderlen's strategy in 1911 resembled Holstein's in 1905, but with the difference that Kiderlen wanted substantial colonial gains. War, he initially argued, would not be necessary, but the French would be willing to surrender the whole French Congo as compensation if convinced that

⁷¹ Ibid. pp. 64–65, 124–26. In the spring of 1909, shortly before Bülow's resignation, the chancellor had discussed a possible naval and political agreement with various high officials. Curiously a draft of an Anglo-German neutrality agreement prepared in the German Foreign Office at that time included an escape clause releasing either party from its obligation to remain neutral should the other party attack a third country; see J. Lepsius et al., eds., *Die Grosse Politik der Europäischen Kabinette 1871–1914* (Berlin, 1924–28), 28: nos. 10302–03, 10306. Bethmann refused any such escape clause.

⁷² Martin Kitchen, *The German Officer Corps 1890–1914* (Oxford, 1968), pp. 31–36.

⁷³ Jarausch, *The Enigmatic Chancellor*, pp. 192–93, 206.

Germany was ready to fight. This in turn would ultimately enable Germany to walk off with much of the Belgian Congo and create a unified central African empire from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean.⁷⁴ Later a drunken Kiderlen appeared to Bethmann to aim at war, but agreed that it was not strictly necessary.⁷⁵ Moltke also believed that Germany could only secure a favorable outcome if it remained willing to unsheath the sword. But William drew back from the prospect of war, and while the army felt ready for action, the navy did not. "As regards the war at sea," Tirpitz wrote, "the timing is as unfavorable as possible. With every year that passes we shall be in a much more favorable position. Heligoland, the canal, dreadnoughts, submarines etc."⁷⁶ Bethmann hardly seems to have been determined to avoid war; he agreed with Kiderlen that the possibility must be reckoned with, and according to his assistant Kurt Riezler agreed "that the people need a war."⁷⁷ In the end the government decided to settle for a slice of the French Congo as compensation, partly, it seems, because its Triple Alliance partners seemed unwilling to join in a war unleashed by Germany.⁷⁸ Outrage in the Reichstag and much of the press showed that the government lagged well behind Conservative and National Liberal opinion in this regard. "It is false that in Germany the nation is peaceful but the government bellicose," wrote French Ambassador Jules Cambon, "—the exact opposite is true."⁷⁹

The question of war and peace did not directly arise during the first Balkan War because the government of Austria-Hungary did not wish to intervene against Serbia and risk a European war.⁸⁰ Still, William II bluntly raised the issue of war with England, France, and Russia at the now-famous "War Council" of December 8, 1912. William's interlocutors—including Moltke, Tirpitz, and Admiral Georg von Müller, the chief of his naval cabinet—probably realized the emperor called the council in a temporary rage provoked by reports that Britain would join

⁷⁴ This is the import of his letter of resignation in July; see Fischer, *War of Illusions*, pp. 76–77.

⁷⁵ Riezler, *Tagebücher*, pp. 178–180.

⁷⁶ Fischer, *War of Illusions*, p. 84.

⁷⁷ Riezler, *Tagebücher*, p. 180.

⁷⁸ Fischer, *War of Illusions*, pp. 84–85.

⁷⁹ Jarausch, *The Enigmatic Chancellor*, p. 124.

⁸⁰ Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914* (London, 1952–57), 1: 364–402, is much more convincing on this point than Fischer, *War of Illusions*, pp. 153–59, 209–16, who argues that Germany had to restrain Austria. See also F. R. Bridge, *From Sadowa to Sarajevo. The Foreign Policy of Austria-Hungary, 1866–1914* (London, 1972), pp. 344–47, and Samuel R. Williamson, Jr., "Influence, Power, and the Policy Process: The Case of Franz Ferdinand, 1906–1914," *Historical Journal* 17: 2 (1974): 417–34.

France in a war with Germany even if the war began in Eastern Europe. Probably Bethmann was not invited to emphasize the bankruptcy of his attempts to conciliate England. At the council Moltke again argued for war sooner rather than later, although as Müller noted, he did not suggest that war be immediately provoked. Tirpitz on the contrary argued that war should be postponed for eighteen months. By this time Tirpitz's colleagues had grasped the real nature of his policy; Moltke at this conference correctly anticipated that "the Navy would not be ready even then." The conference, as Müller concluded, had no real result.⁸¹ In subsequent months Vienna became more bellicose, but no one in the German government—not even Moltke—showed much enthusiasm for a war over the Balkans.⁸²

The crisis of July 1914 was not unleashed by the German government. Serbian nationalists within and outside the Serbian government planned the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, and most of the Austro-Hungarian leadership had already decided upon drastic action against Serbia *before* Count Hoyos went on his mission to Berlin.⁸³ The chronic paralysis over questions of war and peace within the German government makes it unlikely that Berlin ever would have provoked a war out of the blue; to a certain extent the Germans had to be pushed into the war by exogenous impulses. Yet the chancellor's reactions to the crisis reflected his own longstanding foreign policy goals. If Vienna made the initial decision to fight, Berlin followed for its own reasons.

Bethmann Hollweg in 1914 felt dissatisfied with the results of his policy. Although in July he finally concluded the Baghdad Railway Agreement with London, his attempts to make a new agreement regarding the Portuguese colonies had proven embarrassing. In 1913 he had announced that such talks were underway, only to find that London insisted that any new agreement be public, and that it be accompanied by the publication of the Windsor Treaty, under which Britain guaranteed the Portuguese colonies, as well. Talks on the future of the Belgian Congo had gone nowhere, not least because the French had already been promised a say in its eventual disposition.⁸⁴ And in place of his vaunted neutrality

⁸¹ Fischer, *War of Illusions*, pp. 161–62.

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 213–219.

⁸³ See Samuel R. Williamson, Jr., "Vienna and July 1914: The Origins of the Great War Once More," in *Essays on World War I: Origins and Prisoners of War*, ed. Samuel R. Williamson, Jr., and Peter Pastor (New York, 1983), pp. 23–24; and the protocol of the Austro-Hungarian Council of Ministers for Common Affairs, 7 July 1914, reprinted in Immanuel Geiss, *July 1914. The Outbreak of the First World War: Selected Documents* (New York, 1974), no. 9.

⁸⁴ Fischer, *War of Illusions*, pp. 310–320; see also G. P. Gooch and Harold Temperley, eds., *British Documents on the Origins of the War* (London, 1926–38), vol. 10, pt. 2, nos. 266, 351, 370.

agreement, Bethmann faced rumors of an Anglo-Russian naval convention.⁸⁵

On July 7—one day after Bethmann had assured Hoyos of German support in all eventualities—the chancellor unburdened himself to Riezler at his Hohenfinow estate. Extraordinarily pessimistic, he clearly regarded his attempts at detaching Britain from the entente as a failure. He described the rumored Anglo-Russian naval agreement as “the last link in the chain” and characterized the anglophile German Ambassador Lichnowsky as too trusting and too easily led by the British. He reported Austria’s determination to act, adding that an action by Austria against Serbia “could lead to world war”—that is, to a war including Britain. The next day he noted that the current situation was not without advantages: “If war comes from the east, so that we must fight for Austria-Hungary and not Austria-Hungary for us, then we have a chance of winning. [The day before he had said that Austria was incapable of fighting for German interests; he was probably thinking of the second Moroccan crisis, when Vienna had not stood up for Berlin.] If war does not come, if the Tsar does not want it or a dismayed France counsels peace, then we have a chance to divide the entente over this question.” Russia’s growing strength still obsessed him; new Russian railways in Poland, he remarked, would render Germany’s strategic position untenable.⁸⁶

Bethmann, then, viewed the crisis as an opportunity drastically to improve Germany’s international position—in peace if possible, by war if necessary.⁸⁷ If the entente refused to fight, Germany’s political supremacy would be secure and the path to future overseas expansion open; if war did come, better that it come now rather than later, since the balance of forces could only become less favorable for Germany. Throughout the July crisis Bethmann insisted upon confronting Russia and France with a choice between a humiliating diplomatic defeat and war. As for his war aims, Bethmann made them entirely clear on July 29, while extending his “neutrality bid” to British Ambassador Sir Edward Goschen. Alluding to the possibility of a general war should Russia “attack Austria,” he expressed his hope that Britain would remain neutral. Be-

⁸⁵ While it is true that naval talks were planned they would not apparently have led to any real result. Sir Edward Grey wrote in late April that there was no real possibility of combined operations. Such conversations would “amount simply to letting Russia know that our naval forces would be used outside the Baltic, and that Russia could put her own naval forces to the best use inside the Baltic” (*British Documents*, vol. 10, pt. 2, no. 541 [Grey to Bertie, May 1, 1914]).

⁸⁶ Riezler, *Tagebücher*, pp. 182–84.

⁸⁷ Fischer goes much too far in arguing that the above-quoted passages show a preference for war; see *War of Illusions*, pp. 479–480.

lieving that Britain would never allow France to be crushed, he assured the British government that if London remained neutral a victorious Germany would respect the territorial integrity of France. In reply to Goschen's question he declined to give such an assurance regarding the French colonies. He pledged to respect Dutch neutrality but clearly foreshadowed the invasion of Belgium, adding that if Belgium did not take sides against Germany, her integrity would be respected after the conclusion of the war. "Finally, His Excellency said that he trusted that these assurances might form the basis of a further understanding with England which, as you well know, had been the object of his policy ever since he had been Chancellor."⁸⁸

The war, then, was not designed to conquer European territory—or at the very least, not *Western* European territory—but to establish German military supremacy on the Continent and secure a much larger colonial empire, including the entire French Congo and possibly Morocco as well. The occupation of Belgium under the Schlieffen Plan would also offer excellent chances for the extension of German influence over the Belgian Congo, the prize which Berlin had long coveted above all others. Such aims had evidently been under discussion in Berlin for at least a week; the shipping magnate Albert Ballin had arrived in London on July 20 and had made a similar offer to Winston Churchill on July 25.⁸⁹ They reflected the policy Bethmann had followed since becoming chancellor: by assuring London that he had no designs upon the British Empire itself, he hoped to win Britain's sanction for expansion at the expense of others. As Bethmann told the Reichstag several months later, he had hoped that "Germany's growing strength and the growing risk of war would compel Britain to realize that [the principle of the balance of power] had become untenable and impracticable and that a peaceful settlement with Germany was preferable."⁹⁰ If Britain would not accept this bargain it would be as well to begin war now. The basic principle of Bethmann's policy was his conviction that Germany had to expand. Because of this conviction, and because of his belief that Germany's chances were slipping away, he regarded his risky policy in July 1914 as "a leap in the dark and a most difficult duty."⁹¹ The war Bethmann unleashed was indeed a grasp at world power; in that essential sense Fischer is entirely correct.

Bethmann seems to have made the decision to risk war on his own; the argument of Wolfgang Mommsen and Konrad Jarausch that the military

⁸⁸ Geiss, *July 1914*, no. 139.

⁸⁹ Lamar Cecil, *Albert Ballin. Business and Politics in Imperial Germany, 1888–1918* (Princeton, 1967), pp. 206–7.

⁹⁰ Fischer, *War of Illusions*, p. 548.

⁹¹ Riezler, *Tagebücher*, p. 185.

forced Bethmann into a compromise policy likely to lead to war is not supported by the evidence. Certainly the military had long pressed for a preventive war, and Helmuth von Moltke, the Chief of the General Staff, favored one in the spring of 1914.⁹² But only a few weeks before the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, Bethmann had agreed with the Bavarian minister to Berlin that the moment for a preventive war had passed and added that the emperor would never consent to one.⁹³ More significantly, the military seems to have played no role whatever in the July decisions that actually led to the conflict. Moltke was taking a cure when Hoyos visited Potsdam. When War Minister Erich von Falkenhayn wrote Moltke on July 5 he expressed doubts that Austria really intended any serious action. When Moltke finally returned to Berlin on July 28 the memorandum he sent Bethmann was most temperate in tone.⁹⁴ Bethmann was as willing as Moltke to allow matters to come to war with Russia; as early as July 23 Bethmann told Riezler that if Russia mobilized Germany would strike.⁹⁵

Furthermore, war took place only because Bethmann *circumvented* the decision-making structure of the German government. Had the chancellor felt after the Hoyos mission that he had been coerced into a dangerous policy he would have had ample opportunity to save the situation and preserve peace. Tirpitz, who was also taking the waters during the Hoyos mission, would surely oppose a risky policy on the grounds that the navy was not yet ready for war; only two months earlier he had told Admiral von Müller that the fleet needed six to eight years of additional preparation.⁹⁶ More important was William, who was bound to turn tail as soon as danger came near. Yet Bethmann refused to summon Tirpitz to Berlin—the grand admiral returned on his own initiative on July 28—and encouraged William to take his North Sea cruise. When on July 27 William finally did return, Bethmann effectively circumvented his attempts to preserve peace by forcing the “Halt in Belgrade” plan upon Vienna—a plan which in Tirpitz’s opinion removed all pretext for war.⁹⁷ The

⁹² Egmont Zechlin, “Motive und Taktik der Reichsleitung 1914,” *Der Monat* 209 (February 1966): 91–95; see also Isabel V. Hull, *The Entourage of Kaiser Wilhelm II 1888–1918* (New York, 1982), pp. 236–65.

⁹³ P. Dirr, ed., *Bayerische Dokumente zum Kriegsausbruch und zum Versailler Schuldspruch* (Munich, 1922), no. 1 (Lerchenfeld to Hertling, June 4, 1914).

⁹⁴ Geiss, *July 1914*, nos. 7, 125.

⁹⁵ Riezler, *Tagebücher*, p. 190.

⁹⁶ J. C. G. Röhl, “Admiral von Müller and the Approach of War, 1911–14,” *Historical Journal* 12: 4 (1969): 667.

⁹⁷ Walter Görlitz, *The Kaiser and His Court. The Diaries, Notebooks and Letters of Admiral Georg Alexander von Müller, Chief of the Naval Cabinet, 1914–18* (London, 1961), p. 10; Albertini, *Origins of the War of 1914*, 2: 446–527.

pressures that had kept Germany out of war in 1905, 1911, and 1912 failed in 1914 because the chancellor did not allow them to make themselves felt.

And what of the argument that the German government in 1914 chose war as a means of dealing with the growing Social Democratic threat? Here the evidence is unequivocal: whatever the views of the military and the Pan-German extremists, the chancellor regarded any attempt to use war in such a way as both futile and unwise. In June 1914 he told the Bavarian minister that a new war would not turn Germany rightward: "On the contrary a World War with its incalculable consequences would strengthen tremendously the power of Social Democracy, because they [*sic*] preached peace, and would topple many a throne."⁹⁸ On July 7 he told Riezler that he expected from a war "a revolution of everything existing"; the Conservative Heydebrand's view that war might strengthen the patriarchal order and spirit he viewed as "nonsense."⁹⁹ Nor of course did he make the slightest attempt to use the war to crack down on Socialism. Thwarting the military's plans to arrest all Socialist leaders at the outset of hostilities, he instead assured himself of the SPD's loyalty personally, and made it clear from the beginning of the war that the people, as Bülow had predicted, would have to be rewarded for their tremendous sacrifices.

Some evidence does suggest that Bethmann thought a war might have favorable domestic consequences of a more general character. During the second Moroccan crisis Riezler wrote that Bethmann shared "the truly German, idealistic conviction that the people need a war."¹⁰⁰ Addressing the new Reichstag in February 1912 he had voiced his belief that the German people and the parties had a "deep longing . . . for aims which are worth fighting for."¹⁰¹ In July 1914 he was deeply disturbed by Germany's internal condition: to Riezler he referred to the "miserable decline of the political leadership. Individuals as such become smaller and more meaningless, no one says anything great or true. The failure of the intelligentsia, the professors." Unlike Riezler he was not certain what the German people's response to war would be, though he was moved by the determination of public opinion late in the crisis.¹⁰² While extremely important, these vague statements certainly do not suggest that he regarded Socialism as the chief threat to Germany. Rather they

⁹⁸ Geiss, *July 1914*, p. 47.

⁹⁹ Riezler, *Tagebücher*, p. 183.

¹⁰⁰ Riezler, *Tagebücher*, p. 180. Having originally written "idealistic and correct conviction (*richtige Überzeugung*), Riezler crossed out "*richtige*" and put a question mark in the margin of his diary.

¹⁰¹ Fischer, *War of Illusions*, p. 104.

¹⁰² Riezler, *Tagebücher*, pp. 183, 185, 193.

reflect the distaste of the idealist Bethmann for the political fragmentation and selfishness characteristic of his time—qualities for which he criticized all the German parties, and above all the Conservatives.

As the chancellor in 1914 Bethmann still controlled German foreign policy, far more so indeed than he had in 1911 when he had had to contend with the formidable figure of Kiderlen. He remained subordinate to the emperor, but could easily have seized upon William's eagerness for a peaceful solution to the July crisis had he wished to do so. Despite Austria-Hungary's determination to punish the Serbs, war was not inevitable. Unable to begin military operations until August 12, the Vienna government could not possibly have held out against united pressure to accept some variant of the "Halt in Belgrade" plan.¹⁰³ Furthermore, during the crisis Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Sazonov made it clear again and again that he was more than willing to see Serbia severely chastised if only Vienna would agree to modify its ultimatum and treat its quarrel with Serbia as a European question.¹⁰⁴ A solution to the crisis along these lines might not have solved Austria-Hungary's fundamental problems, but it would have substantially increased the prestige of the Triple Alliance. Certainly it could not have been construed as a humiliation to Germany, especially since no direct German interest was at stake.

Bethmann held to a more dangerous course because he, unlike Bülow, believed that Germany's need for expansion justified the risks, particularly since he believed that Germany's chances were slipping away. In that sense Bethmann was a victim of the idea of *Weltpolitik*—an idea which by 1914 had outgrown its relatively modest origins. Historians must trace more precisely the diffusion of the belief in the inadequacy of Germany's international position; clearly it was not merely a tool used by the government to increase its support. Even before 1897 expansionist ideas had a broad following, and by 1911, if not 1908, extragovernmental opinion had become far more bellicose than the Imperial government

¹⁰³ See Albertini, *Origins of the War of 1914*, 2: 466–527 and 651–673, and 3: 232–36. It is difficult to accept the argument of Andreas Hillgruber, *Germany and the Two World Wars* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), pp. 26–32, that Bethmann had planned to have the powers step in and negotiate a settlement of the crisis all along.

¹⁰⁴ See for example Geiss, *July 1914*, no. 90, 100, 141a. On July 27 the Austro-Hungarian Ambassador, Friedrich Szápáry, reported Sazonov's statement that "He had no feelings for the Balkan Slavs. They were actually a heavy burden on Russia and we could hardly imagine how much trouble they had already given Russia. Our [Vienna's] aims, as described by me, were perfectly legitimate but he thought the way we had chosen to attain them not the safest" (Albertini, *Origins of the War of 1914*, 2: 404–05).

itself.¹⁰⁵ German statesmen could hardly ignore public opinion, but to them fell the responsibility to balance the pressure for expansion with a more realistic calculation of Germany's national interests. In this task Bethmann Hollweg failed dismally.

Germany's situation in 1914 justified neither the general belief in its need for colonial expansion nor the increasing doubts as to its future security. Her growing population and industry did require increased foreign commerce, but German trade statistics gave no cause for alarm. German exports, which had been increasing steadily since the early 1890s, had grown even more rapidly in the immediate prewar years. Total exports had increased more than 50 percent since 1909, and Germany's negative trade balance had shrunk dramatically in 1912 and 1913. Nor did the statistics show any great need for colonial expansion. 82 percent of German imports came from European and American countries; 91 percent of German exports went to these countries.¹⁰⁶ High German officials occasionally admitted the somewhat mythical character of the need for German expansion—Gottfried von Jagow admitted to a British diplomat in 1913 that Germany did not really know what she wanted¹⁰⁷—but seemed incapable of acting upon that realization. "The imperialism, nationalism, and economic materialism, which during the last generation determined the outlines of every nation's policy," Bethmann wrote in August 1914, "set goals which could only be pursued at the cost of a general conflagration."¹⁰⁸ Himself unschooled in foreign affairs, he never challenged the assumption that these goals could justify such a conflagration.

Furthermore, the chancellor's fear of Russian power—which the war showed to be groundless—was not shared by those in the best position to know. In early 1914 neither the German nor the Austro-Hungarian nor the French Ambassador to Russia believed that Russia had any aggressive designs upon Germany. "I cannot agree with the view that we must reckon with aggressive plans from our eastern neighbor within a few years," German Ambassador Friedrich von Pourtalès wrote Bethmann on March 11. In January Friedrich Szápáry predicted that economic cir-

¹⁰⁵ Stegmann, Eley, and Wernecke provide many valuable insights about the movement of German opinion, but a more systematic study is needed. Another suggestive book is Roger Chickering, *Imperial Germany and a World without War* (Princeton, 1975).

¹⁰⁶ Kaiserliches Statistisches Amt, *Statistisches Jahrbuch, 1914* (Berlin, 1914), pp. 253–258.

¹⁰⁷ "The desire for expansion had grown up concomitantly with [her] commercial development, but there had been no preconceived scheme of expansion" (Rodd to Grey, January 6, 1913, *British Documents*, vol. 10, pt. 2, no. 454).

¹⁰⁸ Jarausch, *The Enigmatic Chancellor*, p. 180–81.

cumstances would incline the Russians "toward political detente," and that those elements who wanted a war to divert attention from Russia's internal problems "should hardly be given serious consideration." He confirmed this view in April. On April 14 Maurice Paléologue reported that despite a heated Russo-German press campaign none of the top Russian civilian or military leaders expected a real crisis, and that Russian rearmament simply aimed at making Russia secure.¹⁰⁹ And although some aspects of Russian rearmament were impressive, some observers understood the real lesson of the Russo-Japanese war—that Russia's immense population masked fundamental weaknesses that would take many years to correct.¹¹⁰ European observers differed over the question of Russia's military, economic, and political preparedness for war, but Bethmann's view of a powerful colossus with designs upon Germany was certainly an extreme one.¹¹¹

Just as Bethmann overestimated the overseas benefits of war, so he underestimated its domestic dangers. During its brief history Imperial Germany never overcame a host of serious regional, religious, political, and class antagonisms. Such divisions did not make Germany ungovernable, but they severely restricted the government's freedom of movement. To govern successfully the chancellor continually had to mediate among various governmental institutions, political parties, and social groups. Bülow played this role well until 1908–09, when he antagonized the emperor over the *Daily Telegraph* affair and the Conservatives over taxation. More importantly, he understood that Germany's delicately

¹⁰⁹ See the *Grosse Politik*, vol. 39, no. 15844, and also nos. 15843 and 15858; Ludwig Bittner et al., eds., *Oesterreich-Ungarns Aussenpolitik von der Bosnischen Krise 1908 bis zum Kriegsausbruch 1914* (Vienna, 1930), 7: nos. 9219, 9411, 9417, 9573; *Documents diplomatiques français*, 3rd ser., 9: 105. British Ambassador Sir George Buchanan had great respect for Russia's growing strength but did not address the question of Russia's intentions; see Buchanan to Grey, March 18, 1914, *British Documents*, vol. 9, part 2, nos. 528, 529.

¹¹⁰ Both the French and German military attachés in St. Petersburg still saw serious weaknesses in the Russian army in late 1913 (Risto Ropponen, *Die Kraft Russlands* [Helsinki, 1968], pp. 280–81). British and German naval attachés were even more critical (see Commander H. G. Grenfell to Ambassador Sir George Buchanan, March 19, 1914 [*British Documents*, vol. 9, part 2, no. 531]).

¹¹¹ See Ropponen, *Die Kraft Russlands*, especially pp. 196–296, for an excellent survey of views of Russia. Hillgruber, *Germany and the Two World Wars*, p. 25, notes that Bethmann's fears "can only partially be explained by incredible ignorance about Russia," but suggests no further explanation (Fritz Stern, "Bethmann Hollweg and the War: The Limits of Responsibility," in Krieger and Stern, eds., *The Responsibility of Power*, pp. 271–288, also wrestles inconclusively with the issue of Bethmann's remarkable pessimism).

balanced political structure was unlikely to survive a major war—even if Germany won—and tailored his foreign policy accordingly. In an age of imperialism crises were inevitable, but Bülow steered a careful course. He consoled himself with the observation that Germany's strength *was* increasing, both absolutely and relatively, and that the government faced no serious domestic or foreign threats. All this was perfectly true. In retrospect the common contemporary criticism of Bülow—that he concealed the failures of his policy with fine words—seems heavy with irony.

By contrast, Bethmann seems more fatalistic about the international situation and less willing to accept the limitations of Germany's domestic structure. He continually complained about the disunity and selfishness of German political life without apparently recognizing the limitations these factors must inevitably impose upon his freedom of action. More than once Riezler railed at "this damnably confused modern world . . . so complex that it can neither be grasped nor predicted," and Bethmann frequently wished that the parties would put their particular interests aside for the common good.¹¹² The chancellor underestimated the dangers Germany's fragmented structure might pose in a real crisis; indeed, several of his remarks suggest that he hoped that selfishness would make way for a new unity in a great struggle. The result was the reverse. The war provoked new quarrels over war aims and the internal future of the empire, and domestic divisions became so bitter that the chancellor's role as a mediator became impossible. Eventually all shades of opinion united in seeking his dismissal, and with his chancellorship perished the system that had ruled Germany since 1871.

Since the late nineteenth century the enormous potential power of the modern state has fascinated statesmen, publicists, and historians. Yet the exercise of that power has frequently been thwarted by other characteristics of modern states and societies: the difficulty of coordinating their numerous institutions, the inevitable fragmentation of authority from which they suffer, the tendency of bureaucratic routine and inertia to undercut changes in policy, and the enormous political strains that inevitably accompany any drastic reallocation of resources either at home or abroad. In subsequent years the dilemmas of Bülow, who recognized bureaucratic inertia and political conflict as useful checks upon unreasonable ambition, and Bethmann, whose attempt to cut an imaginary Gordian knot ended in disaster, have proven to be characteristic of the twentieth century. Imperial Germany was the first but not the last modern state to succumb to the fascination of its power while ignoring the constraints upon its use.

¹¹² Jarausch, *The Enigmatic Chancellor*, p. 165.